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LETTER DATED 19 FEBRUARY 1998 FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

In its resolution 1133 (1997) of 20 October 1997, the Security Council requested me to report every 60 days from the date of extension of the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) on the progress in the implementation of the settlement plan and the agreements reached between the parties for its implementation. Following my report of 13 November 1997 (S/1997/882), which included a timetable and my recommendations for the full deployment of MINURSO, I provided, in a letter to the President of the Security Council dated 12 December 1997 (S/1997/974), an account of the identification of potential voters in the referendum since its resumption on 3 December. My report to the Council dated 15 January 1998 (S/1998/35) provided a further detailed account of that process and of other activities in implementation of the settlement plan. Since then there have been several important developments.

As members of the Council are aware, my Special Representative, Mr. Charles F. Dunbar, arrived in the mission area on 9 February 1998. In Rabat, he was received by His Majesty King Hassan II and had meetings with the Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Mr. Abdellatif Filali, and with the Minister of State for the Interior, Mr. Driss Basri. In the Tindouf area, he met with the Secretary-General of the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y del Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO), Mr. Mohammed Abdelaziz, and other Frente POLISARIO leaders. Mr. Dunbar assumed his duties at MINURSO headquarters in Laayoune on 16 February. He travelled to Algiers on 17 February to meet with the Algerian authorities, and will proceed to Nouakchott shortly to meet with the Mauritanian authorities.

During the reporting period, my Acting Special Representative, Mr. Erik Jensen, maintained regular contacts with the parties to resolve difficulties which continued to arise, in particular in the identification process. The Chairman of the Identification Commission, Mr. Robin Kinloch, also held regular consultations with the Moroccan and Frente POLISARIO coordinators with MINURSO. Following visits by the Commission Chairman to Nouakchott and by a technical mission to Zouerate in Mauritania, plans were finalized to open an

identification centre in Zouerate. The centre began its work on 9 February, a month later than originally planned, in part because of the holding of Mauritanian presidential elections in December 1997. The technical mission considered a proposal by Mauritania for a second centre at Atar, instead of Nouadhibou. A decision in this regard is expected to be taken following my Special Representative's consultations with the Mauritanian authorities.

Eight identification teams are currently operating in the mission area (three in Western Sahara, two in the Tindouf area, two in southern Morocco and one in Mauritania). During the 11 weeks since the resumption of the identification process, i.e. between 3 December 1997 and 18 February 1998, 42,484 persons were convoked by the Identification Commission. Of these, 30,425 came before the Commission for interview and identification, bringing to 90,537 the total number of persons identified since the start of identification in August 1994. In January alone, 14,000 persons were identified. This is the highest number achieved in a month so far, notwithstanding the impact of the fasting month of Ramadan and the Eid-el-Fitr holidays.

Interruptions in the identification process owing to the illness of sheikhs on either side caused the loss of three working days at one centre. One day of work was lost at all centres as a result of sandstorms. Disputes between the parties caused the loss of four working days at two centres. A change in procedures at the Laayoune airport for arriving and departing POLISARIO delegations led to the loss of one working day at seven centres, and this was followed by a reciprocal change at the Tindouf airport for Moroccan delegations. In addition, the Eid-el-Fitr holidays necessitated closure of all centres for two and a half days. However, extra hours of identification work, as well as weekend sessions, enabled the Commission to make up for some of these delays.

The above interruptions and other factors contributed to a perceptible increase in tension between the two parties. There was a marked increase in anti-POLISARIO and sometimes anti-MINURSO coverage in the Moroccan press. The other factors included Moroccan official protests and public demonstrations against the negative testimony of several sheikhs on the POLISARIO side, the designation by the Frente POLISARIO of its former "Minister of Defence" (now "Minister for the Occupied Territories") and its "Minister of Education" as observers, and protests against the behaviour of a specific POLISARIO observer; changes in the Moroccan arrangements for meals for the POLISARIO delegation at Laayoune; and refusal, for a time, by a Moroccan observer to allow the identification of non-convoked ex-prisoners of war.

The parties expressed some reservations regarding the decisions contained in my report of 15 January 1998 (S/1998/35) concerning the centres in Morocco, the identification of tribal groups H41, H61 and J51/52, as well as the identification of tribal group D13. Nevertheless, the Identification Commission incorporated these last two decisions in the identification programme for February. In this connection, the Commission expects to identify, during the latter part of February and in March, some 4,000 unconvoked individuals, who presented themselves at identification centres in Western Sahara on the days of convocation of members of tribal groups H41, H61 and J51/52 listed in the 1974 census and their immediate families. On the basis of the outcome of the identification of these 4,000 individuals, decisions will then be made on ways

of dealing with any additional applicants from the above tribal groups, including those in Morocco. In the meantime, I call on the parties to continue to cooperate with MINURSO in the identification of persons from non-contested tribes, including those to be convoked in the towns of Sidi Kacem and El Kelaa des Sraghna in northern Morocco.

Since my report to the Security Council of 15 January (S/1998/35), the number of civilian police officers assigned to MINURSO has remained at 79, including the Civil Police Commissioner, Chief Superintendent Peter Miller. Two additional positions have therefore to be filled in order to bring the civilian police component of MINURSO to its approved strength of 81 officers. As described in my report of 15 January, the civilian police continues to assist the Identification Commission in its daily tasks, and also to prepare for the transitional period.

Under the command of Major-General Bernd S. Lubenik, the military component of MINURSO continues to monitor the ceasefire between the Royal Moroccan Army and the Frente POLISARIO forces and to plan for full deployment. The military situation remains stable, and both sides continue to cooperate with military observers in their respective areas. Two engineering teams from Sweden and Pakistan visited MINURSO in late January and early February to assess the demining requirements and the time necessary to undertake demining activities for both the repatriation of refugees and the installation of additional military team sites at designated locations.

During the reporting period, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) continued its preparatory work for the repatriation of Saharan refugees. Discussions were held by UNHCR with the parties and my Special Representative on its repatriation programme and role under the settlement plan. UNHCR is completing preparations for its special appeal for funds for the implementation of that programme. It is further reviewing the budget for the operation, which is expected to exceed $50 million, of which 60 per cent might be necessary to cover transport and logistics costs. Before issuing its appeal for funds, UNHCR will brief potential donor countries on the repatriation programme and related financial requirements.

I intend to report further to the Security Council in good time before the expiration of the current mandate of MINURSO on 20 April 1998. In the event that circumstances so warrant, I shall bring to the Council's attention any significant developments in the identification process in the coming weeks. In the meantime, I reiterate my appeal to the Council to support continued preparations and provide the necessary resources for the full deployment of MINURSO. I also count on the parties to refrain from any statement or action that could undermine the significant progress made so far in the identification process and to cooperate fully with MINURSO in completing this process, so that the transitional period may start as planned.

Mr. Erik Jensen will have completed his assignment with MINURSO at the end of this month, after four years as Head of Mission. I wish to take this opportunity to place on record my appreciation for his unfailing dedication and invaluable contribution to the peace process under difficult circumstances.

I should be grateful if you would bring this letter to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(Signed) Kofi A. ANNAN